

Reading again

Books don't change, but we do.

by [Yolanda Pierce](#) in the [May 2023](#) issue



(Illustration by Tallulah Fontaine)

The offices have changed, but the floor-to-ceiling bookcases are still filled to the brim. Many of the same books have made the journey with me from the modest shared graduate student office of 20 years ago to my current decanal office, which is much more spacious and pleasantly private. New roles, new titles, new institutions, but many of the same books. New titles join the old ones along the way, but like a favorite chair you move from house to house, I have a book collection that has moved from state to state.

I have grown to appreciate electronic books, but nothing replicates the touch, the physicality of holding a hardcover or paperback in your hands. There are some books I reread almost every year. I've read the same copy so many times that the pages are worn or falling apart. I mark up the margins and circle meaningful passages. I write comments or questions, adding my own words, punctuation marks, and pieces of myself to the text.

My copy of a collection of James Baldwin's essays is being held together by fraying yellow tape. My favorite Toni Morrison novel is stained with my tears, yellow highlighter, and the blue ink of my comments all running together on the page. While I have pristine copies of each of these books as well, I return to these worn copies for comfort. I know approximately how far down on a particular page I can find a given passage. Dog-eared folds, scraps of paper, and informal bookmarks can all be found within the pages of these beloved texts.

While the words in each of these books do not change upon rereading them, I glean something different each time. Part of this can be attributed to the power of great writing: the revelation of truths so significant that people are compelled to read them again and again. A science fiction writer like Octavia Butler creates a dystopian society that, while fictional, seems prophetic in how it anticipates political and environmental events decades after her death. We return to written works that keep revealing truths to us, truths about ourselves and the world around us.

And each time we return to a book, we can see how much we have grown, changed, or shifted since the last time. I come to the same book each time with a set of new experiences under my belt—older and sometimes wiser—which shapes how I read the words on the page. I read Zora Neale Hurston in high school and thought I understood her idea of "sorrow's kitchen," but age, maturity, loss, and grief give new meaning to that phrase today. We return to the same books, even the same words, because we change and our understanding with us.

Like the worn pages of a beloved children's book, we need to return to the sacred scriptures again and again. The words of Ecclesiastes or Job or Galatians have not changed, but new truths are still being revealed, truths about the Divine and truths about ourselves.

We can study scripture our entire lives and still barely scratch the surface of the beauty and mystery of God. We can read the same chapter and verse year after year and still discover some nuance we missed on a previous reading. We might notice a word or a phrase we missed during the last reading. Some new synaptic link forms in our brain, connecting one scriptural passage to another one we never thought was related. We are surprised by some new and fresh approach to reading a passage we had long memorized and digested. I often marvel that we are rereading and retelling a story that is as ancient as days, and yet it is still speaking across time and culture.

We cannot be afraid to be full participants in our reading of the sacred text. Each dog-eared corner, underlined passage, taped-up binding, and tearstained page brings us a little closer to the divine mystery. We read with expectation, with longing, with anticipation that we will hear a word from God. Each exclamation point, question mark, or underlined *why* is an engagement with both faith and doubt, our fears and our beliefs. We can ask questions on the pages of the text that some dare not ask out loud.

Most importantly, each time we read scripture we approach it with a new set of experiences and challenges. You may have memorized passages from the Psalms as a child in vacation Bible school, as the verses were short and easy. But the Psalms are about joy and lament, God's absence and God's presence. They point us to the awe of the Divine as well as to the reality of sin. It is an adult moment in life, born out of trials, when you realize that there is real evil in this world. And it is an adult moment in life, born out of suffering during those trials, when you realize that God can give you a peace beyond understanding. The words of the Psalms you read as a child are the same words you read as an adult. But our failures and triumphs, our loves and losses, our disappointments and successes—all these influence our understanding of the texts that we read.

We need to read our sacred scripture in community, and we need to read it individually. We must hold the book in our hands, with highlighter and pen, unafraid to celebrate or question the passages contained therein. We have to read and read again, so that the words of the sacred text journey with us wherever we go.